

[Review] Zsófia Demjén (2015) Sylvia Plath and the language of affective states: written discourse and the experience of depression

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Zsófia Demjén, *Sylvia Plath and the Language of Affective States: Written Discourse and the Experience of Depression*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015; xiii + 235 pp., £74.99 (hbk).

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Demjén's study of the language in the first of Sylvia Plath's journals (1950-1952) combines corpus stylistics and narrative psychology to offer insights into Plath's emotional wellbeing and state of mind in her final teenage years. Her purpose is to identify the linguistic features that most directly express Plath's affective states, and she suggests that Plath's language can convey 'what these states feel like', the extent that Plath felt the states were within her control, and that they more generally reflect emotional 'valence' and 'intensity' (page 1). Demjén's approach is to compare concordances of the parts of speech and semantic fields in the Smith Journal with their equivalents in a control corpus in order to identify unusual language use and to further compare language tokens within the Smith Journal. In this way, Demjén goes on to analyse Plath's use of the second person pronoun and metaphors associated with feelings.

To perform her analyses, Demjén combines qualitative insights with quantitative corpus findings, adopting a range of approaches and analytical techniques, from systemic functional linguistics to metaphor theory. In addition to the identification and listing of various forms of negative language, Demjén uncovers several original linguistic markers of Plath's pathology, claiming that they are symptomatic of depressive and suicidal tendencies. To this extent, the book contributes to the body of clinical linguistics.

Chapter 1 introduces the study and outlines the structure of the book. Chapter 2 describes the data, comprising the reference corpus and the Smith Journal, so called after the all-women's college in Massachusetts that Plath attended as an undergraduate, and chosen because it 'explicitly focuses on [Plath's] inner turmoil' (page 1). Chapter 3 presents the range of tools and concepts applied in the analyses; they include mind style, affect, systemic functional grammar, transitivity, linguistic indicators of mental illness, and narrative psychology. Chapter 4 reports on the initial corpus analysis, based on parts of speech and semantic fields. Chapter 5 focuses on Plath's direct reference to affective states such as happiness and fear, and on Plath's self-description, finding that she uses both '*I am*' and '*you are*' to refer to herself. Demjén concludes from her manual analysis of references to Plath's self and affective states in 18 selected journal entries that 'the vast majority' express negative affect (page 82). Chapter 6 finds that most of Plath's figurative language also expresses negative affect, the three commonest groups of metaphor relating to *motion*, *fragmentation*, and *physical pain*. Chapter 7 provides radical insights into Plath's use of second-person pronouns to refer to herself. Demjén builds on earlier classifications of second-person narration to produce a new model that takes account of the temporal orientation of the text. Analysing examples of second person narration at clause level in this way, Demjén notes that in the final journal entries, 6 and 14 July 1953, Plath employs imperatives, direct address and metaphors of fragmentation in combination with a present/future orientation, collectively producing a powerful sense of dissociation. This chapter, with its carefully constructed argument, contains a

strong sense of development and represents a major contribution to textual analysis. Chapter 8 identifies Plath's increased self-focus based on self-referential *you* and an associated over-use of *fear/shock* and *worry* semantic fields compared with the control corpus. Chapter 9 discusses the implications of the study.

At first glance, the stylistic insights are limited. Demjén has largely pre-determined the outcome: because Plath was diagnosed with depression and had suicidal tendencies, linguistic evidence of her affective state will be available in her private journal and, once identified, the language will communicate the affect. The reasoning is circular and, even if Demjén did not know what she was looking for before starting her analysis, having found it we could still not know exactly what Plath was feeling at the time either of writing the Smith journal or when experiencing the event she was writing about, nor how much in control of her affective state she felt at any particular point in time. And Demjén's concluding recommendation that psychotherapists listen more carefully to their clients' language (page 215) shows little understanding of the techniques adopted by those specializing in the treatment of depression. Indeed, around the same time that Plath made her first suicide attempt, psychologist Albert Ellis, followed by Aaron Beck, whom Demjén cites, was developing radical new talking treatments to manage depressive disorders.

Demjén needs to set out her reasons for choosing Plath as an object of analysis in the first place and, in view of the book's focus, provide definitions of depression and its manifestations, such as increased self-reference, in the language of the depressed. Demjén's presentation of the literature that informs her approach can seem over-detailed: despite a three-page introduction to systemic functional grammar, it is not subsequently referred to in the study. In contrast, despite its centrality to Demjén's thesis and the point being revisited, the assertion that 'clinical and narrative psychologists have associated unusual self-focus with a variety of affective states including depression, suicidality and narcissism' (page 66) lacks a citation. With its many lists, abstractions and the liberal interpolations of figures and tables, the text becomes a challenge to process. Consigning the plethora of findings to appendices would enable the logic of Demjén's methodology to become more transparent and allow the valuable insights into tense and narrative stance to stand out.

The target readership is not entirely clear. More formalist Plath scholars may consider prurient the forensic examination of the author's state of mind at the time of writing the journal, which was not necessarily intended for publication. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Plath would have published the final entries of the Smith journal in their present form. For general linguists, the main interest will be in the methodological approach, and for them the insistent focus on Plath's putative mental state will be of less relevance.

Nevertheless, revelations such as the high incidence in the Smith Journal of powerful adjectives, though not necessarily those conveying negative affect, are of great explanatory value in relation to Plath's writing in general. Those who are curious about the mechanics of Plath's style, and not just about her experience of depression, will find a fascinating dissection of the out-of-hours workings of Plath's genius. If for no other

reason than the subject matter, this is hardly a book to be read and enjoyed, but were its focus more exclusively on Plath's literary style and less on her person, it could become an indispensable autopsic tool for Plath's other journals and journal writing more generally.

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